

**A STUDY OF MAGARS AFFILIATED WITH THE NEPAL MAGAR  
ASSOCIATION: TRANSITION FROM ASSIMILATION TO IDENTITY  
CONSTRUCTION**

By

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## **Summary of the dissertation**

### **Introduction**

Nepal is in a political transition phase. Nepal stepped into a multiparty democratic political system throwing thirty years of autocratic Panchayat Political System through the 1990s people's movement. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah announced himself as the Constitutional Monarch of the country and lifted all restrictions over political parties. People's movement with a new Constitution promulgated in 1990s opened space for all indigenous ethnic and deprived groups to demand for equal participation, representation and equal access to state resources in the country. All indigenous ethnic groups started to identify themselves as separate groups in the country using their invented cultural codes. In this process of identification, indigenous ethnic group leaders began demanding removal of inequality that existed in the society based on the caste system. The Nepali legal code (Muluki Ain) based on orthodox Hindu religion was blamed for the exclusion of indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal. The summarization of this my dissertation will highlighted the major findings of the dissertation.

The entitled dissertation, "A study of Magars affiliated with the Nepal Magar Association: Transition from assimilation to identity construction" is the outcome of Ph.D research that focused on indigenous ethnic group movement in Nepal in general and Magars case in particular. This dissertation highlighted the open criticism over the domination of the high caste groups of hills in every sphere of economic, political and religion of the country. The issues of group identity became vital for them to be distinguished as a separate group from others. They used cultural codes to be different from other groups. In this process many cultural codes were invented and re-invented and revived from the past. Primordial ideas of being different from others through their physical attributes associated with community groups and attached with their ancestral land were taken as part of the process of identification. In the process of constructing group identity, cohesion within the group was considered important. The Magars, largest ethnic group in the country are also constructing Magar identity establishing social organization called Nepal Magar Association. This study mainly focused on those Magars affiliated with Nepal Magar Association. Many individuals affiliated with Nepal Magar Association (NMA) with their feeling of being Magars attached Magar title suffix as their surname and every individual involved voluntarily for the development of the community.

## **Organization of the dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters. Introduction, Literature review, Methodology followed into the first, second and third chapter. Fourth chapter explained about the historical evolution of Magar identity which mainly focused on Magars' historic according to the eyes of anthropologist, Magars identity during Shah dynasty and lahure, British-India soldiers' recruitments that helped assimilation of ethnic groups into Hindu religious practices in the country. Chapter five explained about social exclusion and indigenous ethnic identity movement in Nepal. Social stratification structured by the caste system, determining indigenous ethnic identity in Nepal, government initiation of formalization of the indigenous ethnic identification, certification of belonging to a group to compete for resources, indigenous ethnic movement in politics, indigenous ethnic women and youth's role on constructing Magar identity, resistance of caste group are discussed. Chapter six explains about construction of Magar identity through self identification process using cultural codes. Chapter seven explains about the political rights issues that are demanded Magars, development of elitism among Magar ac in activists' in NMA, impact of politics among Magars that divides them into different political ideologies and the chapter eight explains about the summary and conclusion of the dissertation.

### **Chapter One**

This chapter explained about ethnic group identity process in Nepal after 1990s people's movement. Many indigenous ethnic groups started constructing their group identity using cultural codes. In this process, they formed ethnic social organization which worked on cultural development of the community turned towards right claiming organization.

### **Chapter Two**

This chapter explains about theoretical aspects of ethnicity and identity issues globally that has impact over South Asia and South East Asia where majority of population of the countries have diverse ethnically, linguistically, culturally and religiously district from others. The discourse of traditional and modern societies as Geminshaft or Gesellschaft or mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity of F. Tonnies and E.Durkheim, the creation of political community by Weber on sharing power common language, religion, common customs, political memories as desired

emphasizing power between nations and state, the definition of ethnicity, nations and nationalism by Smith, Miller with having both nation and ethnic groups occupy a homeland. the former has common myth such as common history, common public culture, single economy and common rights and duties for all members while the latter consists of common myth with ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements shared culture and measure of solidarity at least among elites. While studying ethnic identity issues in Nepal, primordialism and instrumentalism perspectives are commonly understood as theoretical background. Those ethnic groups constructing group identity creating imagined community are inclined towards primordial perspectives where as the others who are observing the former's activities blamed them being instrumental to capture resource in the name of these people

### **Chapter Three**

Chapter Three explains about the methodology used while collecting data to accomplish this dissertation. As a student of anthropology, ethnographic approach is applied in this dissertation. Many people were interviewed as source of information under qualitative research.

### **Chapter Four**

This chapter explains about the ethnic issues in general and Magars issues particularly. This chapter elaborates historical evolution of Magar Identity in Nepal based on those perspectives and understanding about Magars written by the scholars in Nepal. The position of Magars before and during Shah Dynasty shape Magar identity in the country in the eyes of the other groups in the country. Their involvement as soldiers for Shah Rulers and their impressive bravery and honesty attracted India-British colony and established Gurkha recruitment history signing treaty of Sugouly in 1816. Gurkha regiment became an institution enhancing Gurkha recruitment.

### **Chapter Five**

This chapter explained about ethnic identity movement in Nepal carried away with the concept of social exclusion process that made indigenous ethnic groups into deprive situation based on Muluki Ain the legal code. Social stratification forced society to have different strata where majority of resources were captured by the high caste groups. Ethnic movement demanding for equal rights over the state resources, government with

support from bilateral organization initiated giving priority for those deprived groups of the society through their equal participation. The ethnic group identification helped many indigenous ethnic groups to identify as a separate group in the country. Besides their group identity movement, they are also found affiliated with political parties which weaken ethnic movement in the country.

## **Chapter Six**

The Magars, largest ethnic group in the country are constructing their Magar identity using cultural codes. Due to diversity of geographical settlement, Magars are divided into two groups, Barha and Athara Magarath area and three different language groups namely Dhut, Kham and Kaike. Magars are found settled all over Nepal as well as in other countries. The Nepal Magar Association is working as a umbrella organization by establishing sixty seven districts chapters. These district chapters represent Magars from districts to the central Magar association. Thus, NMA is the representative of all Magars. For strong voices to be heard, Magars allied with other ethnic social organizations establishing the National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities.

They have established Nepal Magars Association, a social organization to bring all Magars into one place. Nepal Magar Associations a social organization plays important role in constructing a collective Magar identity. The present political situation has provided an opportunity for Magars to present themselves through distinct cultural codes that they have invented creating an imagined Magar community.. They give priority over their cultural codes to be distinct from others. They mainly focused on language development, religious identification in practicing their life cycle rituals seeking declaration of their choice festival as a nationally accepted with declaration of holiday and demand for a separate autonomous region. For the fulfillment of their demand, they established ethnic social organization registering with the government agency. All indigenous ethnic groups in the country prioritized their demand for access over the state resources.

The Magars' identity construction process portrays Nepal's indigenous ethnic movement in general and Magars' movement in particular. The identity construction movement among all indigenous ethnic groups raised group consciousness related with their rights, analyzing their deprived situation while competing for the state resources with high caste groups who are controlling the power. Magars also supported

indigenous ethnic movement by aligning with NEFIN. The collective group efforts to establish Nepal Janajati Mahasang (NEFIN) helped to provide the most powerful platform for the indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal. It helped to bring all indigenous ethnic leaders into one place. Their collective demand forced the government to establish the National Foundation of Indigenous Ethnic Nationalities (NFDIN). This government unit helps to work for the development of indigenous ethnic groups of the country. Magars being the largest minority in the country are also constructing Magar identity in comparison with the fifty-nine government identified groups in the country. Magars identification movement is carried out using Nepal Magar Association that they have established for the development of the community. The people affiliated with the Nepal Magar Association are individuals who were initially providing social services. This social organization became an ethnic organization that works for the cultural development of the Magar community. NMA worked as an awareness raising center for the Magar community. This helped many Magar activists to stand as Magar leaders and develop their leadership skills and status. The main goal of raising awareness among Magars was to write the word Magar after their names which helped to increase the numbers of Magars during the 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses. Likewise they invented other cultural codes such as attire for males and females to wear during programmes run by NMA. They gave preference for the development of Magar languages by producing text books up to grade five in their mother tongue languages. NMA initiated campaigning to control the expenditure habits of Magars with declaration of being Buddhist and disseminating information to all district chapters to write Buddhist as their religion in the census. This enabled them increase the population of Buddhists in Nepal. The establishment of Nepal Magar Bouddha Sewa Samaj and its promotion of performing life cycle rituals using Buddhist rituals were a form of resistance against Hindu religion. NMA was initially focused on cultural development of the community and turned towards political mobilization in demanding for a Magarath autonomous region. Magar activists are divided into different political parties. They come to NMA to work as Magars representing different districts but end up pursuing goals individual benefit by getting positions. They are using NMA as a platform for their own political and social advancement. Their active participation in political parties helped them gain more recognition within the indigenous ethnic movement of Nepal. Their primordial thoughts and involvement in NMA helped them to achieve certain social positions in the wider society. Affiliation with political parties plays an important role in obtaining positions within NMA. The social positions related to political affiliations have created elitism within the Magar community. The distance between the central committee

members, district chapter members and the general Magars population differentiate their elitism within the social organization that was formed to represent the community. Holding the position in central committee created attractive social and political opportunities for an individual. All Magars are assumed to be members of the community whether they are directly affiliated with NMA or not. The creation of an imagined Magar community by NMA affiliated members makes them to be recognized as an organized and powerful ethnic group among others.

The interaction with their own group members and other indigenous ethnic groups and caste groups helped NMA affiliated members to be accepted as representatives of Magars in the country. The Magars' identity construction process is also supported by the indigenous ethnic group movement demanding for the government's recognition of their existence. In this process of constructing group identity ethnic group symbols were constructed for the group identification. These symbols were taken as group identity markers. These ethnic identity markers are taken as cultural codes for distinct group identification.

Magars are trying to be distinct from other groups through invented dress codes. They declare themselves to follow Buddhism as a form of resistance against Hindu religion. They have initiated social reforms to avoid bad social and cultural practices within the Magar community. In this process of group identification and consciousness raising Magars along with all other indigenous ethnic groups demanded for a national holiday for their ethnic festival. Declaration of a national holiday for their group is seen as an achievement. The demand for an ethnic based autonomous region brought hope among ethnic groups. Magarath autonomous region has become an important agenda for NMA with feeling of having ancestral land and the attachment of the group community.

Despite all these collective efforts, loyalty to political parties plays an important role among members of NMA. Each and every member is associated with a political party. Politics plays important role in membership affiliation and their nominations during elections to the Central Committee of NMA. The political party affiliation also affects the membership and the networking among members. Political party affiliations can be strong enough to affect the membership and exclusion of members. This lies hidden in normal situations but surfaced during elections. The impact of politics and political affiliation among members creates divisions among members especially during elections. Political party affiliations plays an important role in determining the positions

contending member can aspire for within the organization. Affiliation in a political party and the NMA creates discussions among the Magar elites as well as member.

NMA's organizational structure mostly depends upon the membership levy and donations from individuals and social organizations. Despite its demand for a distinct Magar identity with specific cultural codes, it has not developed a vision to bring awareness among the Magar living in remote areas of Nepal. Focus is only on demanding a Magarath autonomous region and promoting activism using upon NMA.

NMA plays an important role in arguing for individual development of Magars using census and other statistics to analyze their groups' position in comparison to other groups. They demand collectively for obtaining equal access to the state's resources. Students have found Magar Student Association as a potential platform for building confidence, enhance networks and cultivate leadership qualities for attracting attention from political leaders.

Nepal Magar Association as an independent social organization has tried to be like the house of 'Muumbis' only to attract members to support their goal through their physical presence and moral support. Due to lack of education and a bold vision for economic development Magars are still embroiled at the political level for state resources. For this they have been constructing a Magar identity. Such a process has reached its limits in bringing radical changes within Magar community. Although, Magar movement is targeted for the cultural development of the Magar community it diverted itself towards political demands without becoming political party. The construction of Magar identity has created a shared common identity with a Magar surname and the invented cultural codes. Magars as a community are unable to follow the trajectories taken by other caste and ethnic groups in South Asia.

Modernization, economic development, urbanization, and globalization have led people to rethink their identities and redefine them in narrower, more intimate and communal terms. People identify with those who are like themselves and with whom they share a perceived common ethnicity, religion, traditions and myths of common decent and common history. In this process of identification, ethnic identity is being questioned, reconsidered, and redefined in searching for their commonness and differences (Huntington, 2004: 3-20). Indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal in general and Magars in particular are constructing group identity by their distinct group identification. This group awareness helps them to think about their position among others while



competing for the resources. This competition has brought realization for the group based collective demand. The primordial thought of being descended from a similar race, assume differs in physical structure, language, cultural practices and their group behavior, the surname that attached with their name has helped them to feel a sense of being together. The group has started following cultural a practice that distinguishes them from others. This distinction created boundaries among groups. These boundaries play an important role on ethnonym and endonym definition. These definitions emerged from the individual's personal understanding of a person from a group through their interaction with other groups. During such interactions, transactions occurred while they were searching for the niche (Barth, 1969). The group legitimation also created conflicts while competing for similar resources (Bond, 2006). Individuals adapt with the environment and come into the group (Eriksen, 1968; Yinger, 1986). The group with strong hold on social, economic and political power dominates the less powerful ones. This domination forces the group to assimilate and acculturate into the powerful group forgetting their own traditional identity. With impact of mass media and awareness groups have started configuring changes within the group. Consciousness of shared identity is created and they negotiate with others for the available resource. The group with different physical feature, language, cultural practices is named as an ethnic group.

Ethnic identity issues emerged when they felt that they are insecure or their existence is in threat. For their existence they became visible using different ethnic markers. These markers are invented or revived based on their knowledge and availability of their resources. They choose certain ethnic markers that can be carried as their invented cultural codes by the majority of the members of the community. Magars along with other indigenous ethnic groups were known in the past as tribal groups of the country. They were isolated and highly depended upon agriculture and followed subsistence farming. With the impact of development, migration and globalization, Magars life styles have changed. They learnt to adapt and adjust with the new environments. The new political change in Nepal allowed deprived sections of the society to demand for their equal rights. In this process of identification they carried primordial thoughts for group distinctiveness which led them towards being instrumental for the social positions and for individual benefits.

Magars along with other indigenous ethnic groups were known as tribal group in the country. They aligned and formed a federation which enhanced their membership with United Nation's Indigenous Forum. This membership brought knowledge about the indigenous ethnic movement's occurring in other parts of the world. The Federation

gave collective power for demanding their rights from the government. A National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities was established by the government. The demands of indigenous ethnic groups increased the sense of insecurity among caste groups. The demand for equal access to education, jobs and scholarships and services and allocation of reservation quota for proportional representation based on their population and demand for autonomous regions based on ethnicity escalated insecurity among the former high caste groups. As a form of resistance, they formed their own social organizations against the ethnic based autonomous regions. The initial focus of cultural development of groups diverted towards political rights focusing on access over the state's resources. Equal participation, representation and equal access over state resources have become the main goal of indigenous ethnic movements. The disparity in the society is expected to be abolished by bringing equal participation and representation in the country. The more people become aware of their political rights the more they become aggressive over their demands. The indigenous ethnic groups feel that the Hindu high castes have tarnished their reputation, subjugated them politically and intellectually, or omitted them from their writings. They have called for a new branch of social and historical sciences that would bring them justice (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009: 25-26). For having equal access over the state resources their participation and representation in the country is essential. Each and every indigenous ethnic group has started constructing their group identity using cultural codes to be distinct from others through separate identification. Using their social organizations, they are targeting state resources through their political demands. Distinct cultural codes, group endonym and historical settlements identify them as distinct groups in the country.

## **Chapter Seven**

This chapter explained about the demand of ethnic autonomous regions that was initiated by the Maoist political party. Magars are also demanding for Magarath autonomous regions based on their historical settlement legacy. The changing of the government has become unpredictable situation of the status of ethnic autonomous region in the country.

## **Chapter Eight**

This chapter summaries and conclude about the whole dissertation on ethnic movement occurring in Nepal for the group identification in general and Magars' movement in particular along with ethnic group identification accelerated after 1990s

movement for their separate group identification. The government initiated reservation system to bring them equal positions as others in the country.